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SELLING AWACS TO THE SAUDIS
CORE COURSE III PAPER

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IN APRIL 1981, the Reagan Administration announced its intention to sell the U S Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS)¹ to Saudi Arabia. By August, many lawmakers remained undecided and Senator Bob Packwood had assembled a bi-partisan list of 50 senators who he said would oppose the sale. But on October 28 when the vote was taken, the Senate supported the sale 52 to 48. What caused undecided and opposed senators to ultimately support the AWACS sale?

Before detailed research began for this paper, the hypothesis was that the sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia was an example of separated institutions operating within the organizational model. Within that framework, the Executive Branch sought its organizational goal of selling the aircraft to the Saudis, over the objection of Congress, by following standard procedures. The Legislative Branch pursued its goal of blocking the sale by employing certain internal rules. As news articles were analyzed from *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* from March 1981 to December 1981, the initial hypothesis began to break down.

The organizational model could not explain what really happened. The Administration framed the sale of AWACS not only as a national security issue, but also as critical to President Reagan's leadership. This was one of the first indications that personal goals were involved. Bargaining became obvious as the White House offered deals in exchange for senators' votes. Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker tried to keep the Republican ranks together while President Reagan worked to sway undecided

senators of both political parties. Their efforts were confronted by Senator Packwood who was organizing opposition to the AWACS sale. All were power players embroiled in what can only be explained in terms of the bureaucratic model.²

THE CONTEXT within which the sale took place included several important events. On November 4, 1979, student militants took over the U.S. Embassy in Teheran, hastening the end of the Shah's regime. This event was significant because the U.S. had been considering selling the AWACS to Iran. As it was, the U.S. lost control of the secret Phoenix air-to-air missile which was in the Iranian inventory when the fundamentalist Islamic revolution swept Iran. If a friendly government like the Shah's could be so suddenly toppled and replaced by the Ayatollah Khomeini's theocracy, was Saudi Arabia safer?

Before 1979 was over, another crisis struck. On December 24, Soviet airborne troops landed at Kabul Airport under cover of darkness, followed by a ground invasion of Afghanistan executed by several Soviet divisions. The invasion demonstrated that Moscow was willing to exercise its influence in Southwest Asia. Proponents of the AWACS sale said that this Soviet threat underscored Saudi Arabia's need for the aircraft. Opponents pointed out that AWACS aircraft were already flying over Saudi Arabia (with U.S. crews), and that the invasion was further evidence of the region's instability.

In November, 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected President and the Republican Party took control of the Senate for only the second time in 50 years. With Senator Howard Baker (R-Tn) as leader of the Senate majority, many predicted a good working relationship between the new President and the Senate.

Shortly before the announcement of the proposed AWACS sale, on March 30, 1981, John Hinckley shot President Reagan twice in the chest in Washington, D.C. The shooting created a surge of sympathy for the already-popular President. Then, as

President Reagan demonstrated remarkable endurance and good humor throughout his recovery, sympathy turned into admiration

Finally, on October 6, 1981, less than a month before the Senate vote, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was assassinated by members of an internal military conspiracy. Once again, Americans were reminded how unstable the Middle East was. Might militants also attempt a coup in Saudi Arabia? Would sensitive equipment aboard the AWACS be safe in Saudi hands?

The AWACS sale important for several reasons. First, it was portrayed by the Administration as essential to protecting vital American interests. Larry Speakes, White House press secretary, explained that the Soviet threat to the Persian Gulf region was the main factor behind the sale. He said, "We feel that the arms sale to the Saudis is a stabilizing influence in the Middle East."³ Even though the Israeli government was adamantly opposed to the sale, President Reagan claimed that the sale was in the best security interests of the U.S. and Israel. As the crucial vote approached, the President went further and charged that senators who refused to see that "are not doing their country a service."⁴ Throughout the debate, it was clear that the Administration felt that the vote was a test of leadership and that the proposed AWACS sale might be the President's first congressional defeat.

BY LAW⁵ the Executive Branch is required to notify Congress prior to concluding a sale of this nature. On April 21, 1981, the Reagan Administration formally announced the proposed sale of an \$8.5B weapon package to the Saudi government. The package included fuel tanks extending the range of Saudi F-15 fighters, new AIM-9L air-to-air missiles, seven KC-135 aerial tankers, and five AWACS aircraft. The five AWACS comprised about \$2B of the total sale.

Congress reacted swiftly and negatively to the announcement, and the AWACS sale was put on autopilot for the summer. White House aides hoped that when they slid

back into the pilot's seat in the autumn, Congress would have mysteriously talked itself into the sale. Instead, the proposed sale to the Saudis was losing altitude and airspeed.

A vote against the AWACS sale in the House of Representatives was certain, and on October 14 the House indeed voted 301 to 111 against. This left the matter to be decided in the Senate, where sentiment was also against the sale. Several forces, however, caused undecided senators to vote for the sale, and opposed senators to change their votes. While such pressure is not unknown in Congress, *The Wall Street Journal* reported sources in the White House and Senate as claiming the AWACS vote was "too grave an issue to be subjected to this sort of vote-swapping."⁶ Having professed they were above such unseemly conduct, both groups pursued it with gusto. Forces acting on individual senators included the Israeli-Jewish lobby, the aircraft industry lobby, party loyalty, constituent interests, and Administration lobbying.

Israelis feared that the AWACS in the hands of the Saudis would threaten their security and stimulate an arms race in the region. In a conflict, the AWACS would give the Saudis a clear picture of the air battle, and allow them to pick off Israeli fighter planes with relative ease. Since the AWACS could "see" several hundred miles into Israel, the intelligence value of the aircraft was not lost on the Israelis. Soon after the initial announcement, Prime Minister Menachem Begin expressed his government's "profound regret and unreserved opposition."⁷ Israeli Ambassador Ephraim Evron formally approached the U.S. State Department and asked the U.S. to reconsider, citing the grave security threat that AWACS posed to Israel.

While Israeli government officials lobbied the Executive Branch, groups like the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations worked the media, insisting that American secrets could fall into Soviet hands if AWACS and its sensitive equipment was sold to the Saudis.⁸ And of all the ethnic groups, the Jewish lobby is widely regarded as important and powerful.

Senator Henry Jackson (D-Wa) was an example of the impact of the American Jewish lobby. The state of Washington is home to the Boeing Military Aircraft Company, which built the AWACS and had a stake in the sale. Senator Jackson wanted to vote for the sale, but he was also a strong supporter of Israel. He sought middle ground by insisting that 1) the aircraft become part of a regional security arrangement, 2) the AWACS would be flown under joint Saudi-American control, and 3) title to the five planes be held in the United States.⁹ At that time, U.S. AWACS planes operating out of Saudi Arabia were under essentially those conditions already. The Jewish lobby was not impressed by his high-wire act, and the Saudis responded that any conditions would be an unacceptable affront. When the vote was taken on October 28, Senator Jackson voted against the sale.¹⁰

Industry lobbying efforts targeted two undecided senators, William Armstrong, (R-Co), and Roger Jepsen (R-Ia), and another senator considered to be leaning against the AWACS sale, Charles Grassley (R-Ia). Boeing president E. H. Boulhoun reached out and touched lawmakers in other states by enlisting the support of subcontractors nationwide. He sent telegrams to Boeing "subs" advising, "Without this sale the AWACS production line will be ended. It is our belief that a negative decision on this issue may affect Saudi Arabia's attitude towards other U.S. products such as commercial aircraft."¹¹ Richard Sellers, lobbyist for Coalition for Peace Through Strength and American Security Council, also worked to make the case for the AWACS sale, and took some credit for creating an environment for these wavering senators to come out in favor of the sale. Senators Armstrong, Jepsen and Grassley voted for the sale.

Party loyalty probably played a part in the votes of those Republican senators, as it did with others who would not commit themselves in favor or opposed to the sale until immediately before the vote. Senator William Cohen (R-Me) was extremely evasive about how he would vote throughout the entire debate. Senator Cohen made his position in favor of the sale known at last during floor debate preceding the final Senate vote.

Senator Mark Andrews (R-ND) likewise revealed his support only when the vote was called for ¹² While party loyalty could be relied upon to sway many Republicans votes, the Administration knew that to ensure victory, what it really needed were some uncommitted Democrats

And one such Democrat was Senator S I Hayakawa (D-Ca) When Senator Packwood (R-Or) publicized a list of 51 senators opposed to AWACS sale, Senator Hayakawa quickly amended that he was incorrectly listed Senator Hayakawa, a long-time champion of Taiwan, stated that in his mind the Saudi package "raises questions about the about the broader issue of the U S arms sales policy world-wide" ¹³ For those who could not read between the lines, the senator spelled it out he was concerned about the White House's apparent hesitancy to sell advanced fighters like the F-16 to Taiwan This linked his vote on the Saudi arms deal to similar consideration for Taiwan Hayakawa apparently got what he wanted because he voted for the sale

Of all the forces at work, however, White House lobbying was the most influential means of changing votes Senator John Glenn (D-Oh), the former astronaut who voted against the sale, lamented, "When the President says, 'I need your help,' that's a rather potent argument" ¹⁴

That kind of reasoning apparently motivated Senator Frank Murkowski (R-Ak) There is no evidence that he traded his vote for anything specific to take back to Alaska He admitted, however, that simply meeting with the President prior to the vote in the White House family quarters was enough to sway him "I was pleased with that kind of atmosphere," Murkowski bubbled, sounding like someone whose airline ticket had suddenly been upgraded to First Class "It was important enough for [President Reagan] to spend a half-hour with me" ¹⁵ The math of the situation is intriguing If the Administration could have identified five other senators with similar needs, President Reagan could have invested roughly three hours and been virtually assured that the vote would have gone his way

Senator Slade Gorton, a Republican from Washington state where the AWACS was assembled, had every reason to vote with the President. Like Senators Cohen and Andrews, however, he played hard-to-get until immediately prior to the vote. A week before the vote, however, Gorton was promised a \$26M appropriation to renovate a hospital in Seattle. White House aides apparently could not find any Seattle orphanages in dire need of repairs. When asked about the possibility of a connection between the promised funds for the hospital and his vote, Senator Gorton denied any link. He allowed, however, that anyone who made such a deal with the Administration would deny it anyway.¹⁶

Senator Larry Pressler (R-SD), was originally considered "signed, sealed, and apparently delivered as an opponent of the sale."¹⁷ Like some other senators, Pressler was stuck between the American Jewish lobby and the President. A week prior to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee vote, Pressler asked Administration aides when the President would sign one of his bills on tourism. The bill had already passed in the Senate and House, and Pressler recalled, "I've been having trouble with the White House. They won't even return my calls."¹⁸

Soon the senator's phone was ringing. A personal meeting with President Reagan followed on October 13, in which Pressler voiced his concerns about the AWACS' ability to track Israeli fighter planes. Then things began happening very quickly. Soon he was meeting the President in the Oval Office, after which the senator gushed, "I must admit, it's a very impressive thing to happen to you." Shortly afterwards, Senate Bill 308 was signed, which an Administration aide admitted was Pressler's bill.¹⁹ Just before the vote in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was taken, Pressler hurried out to answer another, last-minute phone call from President Reagan who was traveling in Philadelphia. When Pressler returned, he voted in favor of the sale.²⁰ Though the committee as a whole rejected the sale by one vote, Pressler's last-minute conversion allowed the White

House to cite progress in getting the sale through the Senate with less than two weeks until the final Senate vote

Senator Charles Grassley (R-Ia) protested that an unnamed White House lobbyist told him that "if I were right on AWACS maybe they (the White House) could expedite the nomination" of Evan Hultman, whom Grassley was supporting for U S attorney in Iowa. Claiming innocence otherwise seen only in used car sales, the senator explained, "I doubt I can vote for AWACS simply because it would be a public perception that I was doing it just to get my friend, a loyal Republican, appointed attorney."²¹ Grassley was later reported as "so angered by White House lobbying tactics" that he declined an invitation to speak to President Reagan on the subject.²² His anger apparently subsided by the time the vote was taken, however, because Grassley sided with his President. When asked about his vote, he sighed that the whole affair appeared to be a *fait accompli*. "I was convinced three weeks ago that the President would win," the senator explained.²³

Not every senator acceded to White House pressure, however. Senator Rudy Boschwitz (R-Mn) forecast as soon as sale was announced in April that it "appears to face certain defeat in the Senate."²⁴ At the same time Democratic Senator Pressler was coming around to the President's point of view, Senator Boschwitz remained the lone Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee opposing the sale. Was the subsequent announcement of a military base closure in Minnesota coincidence? Probably not. Evans and Novak confirmed that Boschwitz was "marked by the White House as one who ought to suffer a little."²⁵

Senator Boschwitz's crime had not been simply voting his conscience, but like Senator Packwood, actively lobbying other Republicans against the President's cause. Senator Packwood's negative stance on the AWACS sale was known almost immediately, and in the face of a close vote, his attempts to organize bi-partisan opposition angered many in the White House. When the senator addressed the Senate before the vote, several well-known White House aides stood up and walked out. Only hours after the vote,

Republican campaign contributors began an effort to remove Senator Packwood as chairman of the Senate Republican Campaign Committee²⁶

IN THE AFTERMATH of the Senate vote, *The Wall Street Journal* editorialized that "the Awacs episode was an exceedingly bad show"²⁷ Jack Anderson ran an article in *The Washington Post* titled, "Reagan's Senate Ties Damaged " Across the board, observers concluded that this was a battle that did not have to occur. The sale of AWACS originated during the last days of the Carter Administration, and was probably adopted by the Reagan White House before it had been studied thoroughly. Although it hardly brought the government down, it did not add luster to any of the participants' images, and undoubtedly increased wariness between Congress and the White House

The case demonstrated beyond any doubt the applicability of the bureaucratic model. Individuals--President Reagan, individual senators--were the key actors in this drama. The Administration's claim that the vote was important to the President's leadership, mixed with the personal interests of several senators, were the clear focus of action. Finally, the process leading up to the vote was replete with interpersonal dynamics ("I must admit, [a meeting with the President] is a very impressive thing to happen to you "), bargaining (renovation of a Seattle hospital), and rewards and penalties (consider the fate of Senators Packwood and Boschwitz)

All five AWACS were delivered to Saudi Arabia by September 1987

Notes

¹ The E-3 AWACS is a modified four-engine Boeing 707 aircraft with a disc-shaped rotodome mounted above the fuselage. The rotodome measures 30 feet in diameter and houses a Westinghouse AN/APY-1/2 surveillance radar. The radar, combined with on-board computers, can detect and track airborne aircraft and surface vessels at sea to a distance of about 350 miles. Communications include HF, VHF and UHF radios. The AWACS is flown by a flight crew of four, with 13 AWACS specialists. It can orbit for about 12 hours unrefueled. Source *Jane's All The World's Aircraft* Mark Lambert, ed (Surrey UK: Jane's Information Group, 1991), 364-5.

² Classroom handout, "Three Models," 14 Nov 95, and David C. Kozak, "The Bureaucratic Politics Approach," *Bureaucratic Politics and National Security*, Kozak and Keagle, (Boulder: Lynne Reimer, 1988) 3-15.

³ Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. Says Saudi Deal Will Not Endanger Security of Israelis," *The New York Times*, 23 Apr 1981, A3.

⁴ John M. Goshko, "President Raps AWACS Foes' Patriotism," *The Washington Post*, 25 Oct 1981, A9.

⁵ Under a 1976 amendment to the Arms Export Control Act, Congress gained the authority to reject sales of military equipment that exceeded \$7M per item, or \$25M for a total package. The Executive Branch must provide Congress 30 days of formal notice in which the House and Senate must adopt concurrent, identically-worded resolutions in order to reject the sale. Under a "gentlemen's agreement," an additional 20 day pre-notification period was added. Source "AWACS Subject to Congressional Veto," *Congressional Quarterly*, 12 Sep 1981, 1757.

⁶ Albert R. Hunt, "Some Senators Say They Were Promised White House Favors," *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 Oct 1981, 4.

⁷ Gwertzman, A1.

- ⁸ Richard Halloran, "Awacs for Saudis Curb on Soviet or Perl to Israel?" *The New York Times*, 26 Jun 1981 A-2
- ⁹ Gwertzman, A-3
- ¹⁰ "Roll-Call Vote," *The New York Times*, 29 Oct 1981 B-11
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- ¹² Edsall, A-11
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²⁷ "After Awacs," *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 Oct 1981 30

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